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Canadian War Museum

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Leonard Brooks – War Artist
(1911-2011)

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C anadian Second World War artist Leonard Brooks died in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, on 20 November 2011 just 13 days after his 100th birthday. He had lived in Mexico since 1947.

Brooks came to Canada from England in 1913 as a very young child. Largely self-trained as an artist, throughout the 1930s he worked mainly in Toronto as a commercial artist, freelance painter, and teacher in between extensive travels in Europe. He joined the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1943. After designing sets for the “Meet the Navy Show” that toured Canada and Europe, the Canadian navy appointed him an official war artist in 1944.

The Canadian War Museum has custody of 113 naval works by Brooks. Most are watercolour sketches. “All my children,” he called them when he visited the Canadian War Museum in 1998. They depict scenes from many of the areas where the Canadian navy was active including Canada’s east coast, the English Channel, and Scapa Flow. Because Brooks did not witness any of the major naval events of the war, many of his works capture the prosaic and mundane tasks that formed the day to day existence of sailors at sea. Writing to National Gallery director H.O. McCurry on the 2 December 1944 about his then relatively new naval war artist experiences, Brooks commented: “We have rather a difficult time in finding Canadian activity – but the few routine tasks of convoy, minesweeping – etc. provide material which if not as melodramatic as invasion [here Brooks is referring to the 6 June 1944 D-Day Invasion] – has plenty of chances for creative work.”

In an interview with his biographer John Virtue on 5 October 1995, he noted: “Our terms of reference were to interpret as we could or make sketches. We would wander around and do anything. Being aboard a ship [-] sometimes there’s not that much to paint. You’re looking out at the water forever and there may be submarines underneath. It’s nice when a convoy comes by or a plane. You’re not supposed to be painting just a bunch of waves. Here’s some guys chipping paint off. Or I’d go down where they were cooking.”

Potato Peelers (undated), which shows two seated sailors preparing vegetables against a seascape background, for example, is not a subject that was ever painted by any other naval artist.

Brooks described his working approach in his December 1944 letter to McCurry. “Forgive the scrawl. - We are rolling along in great style & the ward-room table gives a kick every so often. I have managed to work out a system of scribbling & taking notes on this kind of rough day. By devious ways I scribble a note or two on rough paper – dodge the spray & find my way below to re-draw and fill in as

much information as I can – dash up again & repeat the performance. It looks rather ridiculous – but is very effective."

In London, he mourned the restriction of his subject matter to naval scenes. Writing to McCurry on 4 February 1945, he lamented that “Some of the best material is of course – nothing to do with Canadian navy. Forster [fellow war artist Michael Forster] & I gaze with longing at V2-holes - & walls – sleepers in the tubes etc [London’s subway system] – but try & remember it is Navy material we should deal with.” Mc Curry encouraged him to branch out from the navy in his 21 February 1945 reply. “It will all add up to the picture of Canada at war” he noted. Not only did Brooks branch out but he took advantage of his time in London to see what other war artists were doing. Pink Room, V2 Damage (1945) shows the influence of the wax resist technique utilised by British war artists like John Piper.

The war provided most of the war artists with materials that had not been affordable for many of them in the Depression years. While the military services were generous (war artist Charles Comfort had drawn up the list) anything that appeared not to have gone through the usual channels for approval was treated with suspicion. The Canadian War Art Committee considered Brooks’ personal order of a No.198 size 30 watercolour brush at a cost of $9.60 plus postage as exorbitant. Artist suppliers Loomis and Tole disagreed. “The brush was a very large wash brush made of red sable and the price we assure you was in no way exorbitant [sic].”

In July 1945, Gilbert Tucker, the director of the Naval Historical...
Section submitted to the Canadian War Records Committee a list of the subjects that Brooks had agreed to develop into finished oil paintings. Brooks’ proposed subjects included such titles as *Boom Defence Gear at Scapa Flow, Cherbourg Harbour, MTBs at Felixstowe*, various views of an aircraft carrier (presumably HMS *Puncher*, on which he had sailed), an Atlantic convoy scene, and Channel minesweeping activities; 12 canvases in total ranging in size from 24 x 30 inches to 40 x 48 inches. On 26 September 1945, from his Halifax studio the artist reported on his progress to McCurry that “some are getting to be near-illustrations in spite of my effort to avoid that kind of thing.”

It is not only his paintings but his written and spoken testimony to the events that he witnessed that mark the death of Leonard Brooks as something to mourn. As documents, his paintings have an important role to play in Canada Second World War naval record but his words, which like his work will live on, give meaning to the entire body of Canada’s Second World War art. In summarizing his contribution in an interview with art historian Joan Murray on 25 October 1977, Brooks noted: “It is important that we were commissioned and charged with the task of doing such work. Most of it doesn’t add up to great art, but these paintings have left a legacy of truthful seeing and feeling, and caught for posterity, some of the deep and terrible days of courageous despair and brave hopes for a better future.”

With the death of Leonard Brooks, war art in Canada has lost one its most articulate spokesmen.

**Notes**

4. Leonard Brooks, *Potato Peelers* (undated), egg tempera on paper, 32.7 x 38.4 cm, Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-1147.


Laura Brandon is Historian, Art and War, at the Canadian War Museum. She is the author of *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada’s War Art* (University of Calgary Press, 2006).
Rough Weather, Minesweeper Bridge (above); Motor Torpedo Boat Base, Felixstowe (below)

Leonard Brooks
Aircraft Carrier, Atlantic Convoy (above); Peeling Potatoes (below)

Leonard Brooks